RESOURCE GUIDE: ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This document is split into the following sections:

- Introduction: Explains why the checklist was developed and who might find it useful.
- Checklist for accessible communications: Explores how to design and layout print and digital tools so they are accessible.
- Checklist for inclusive communications: Explores how to consider representation, consent and decisions around whose story to tell and how to tell these stories.
- References and further resources: This section links to further guidance on inclusive and accessible communications which organisations may find useful.
- Appendices: Extra information on language, and example consent forms.

Who this tool is for

This tool is suitable for any organisation or group developing communications across print or digital media.

Our research found that people with disabilities are not always meaningfully considered in organisations' internal and external communications. **This lack of consideration is a social justice issue.**

It means that people with disabilities may not be able to access the information you share or be involved in the activities you do, even though these activities will be relevant to them. It means that people with disabilities may feel they are not invited to participate because they are not visible and represented in your communications.

This weakens work on tackling inequalities. If the perspectives of people who are significantly affected by inequality are left out of your strategies and approaches, they are incomplete and less likely to succeed.

Why was this tool developed?

Many guides and checklists for accessible communications already exist. We have shared some of them in the resources section below. But although a lot of information and guidance is available, our research participants shared examples of communications from many organisations that were not accessible.

Participants wanted to co-develop a communications tool which reflects experiences of exclusion and addresses the activists' questions on how to make their communications more accessible. Participants wanted to make sure the tool reflects the issues they face in Ghana and Kenya where they are based.

Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations
Inspiration • Inclusion • Impact

UDPK UNITED DISABLED PERSONS OF KENYA

How to use this tool

There are lots of different ways to communicate. Activities, websites, emails and social media are just some of the many ways organisations communicate. There are also many different disabilities. This means people with disabilities are very diverse, and they will find different types of communications approaches helpful. Sign language support, using plain language and considering the contrast between text and background in documents are just some of the ways to make your communications inclusive and accessible.

An organisation's communications should represent its values and priorities. If you are part of the equality or disability movement, your organisation's communications should promote equality and inclusion at all levels.

These checklists will help you start to think about whether your organisation's communications materials, like websites, reports or even day-to-day communication, are in formats and styles that all people can access and meaningfully engage with, regardless of their disability or education level. It is important to remember that what works for one person with a disability may not work for another person, even if they have the same disability. This is why it is important to make all communications as inclusive and accessible as possible. At the same time, it is important to ask people what their needs are and work to accommodate those. You can read more about this in our guidance note on reasonable adjustments.

A good starting point is to ensure that the design, layout and content of 'standard' information is accessible and relevant to a broad range of people. This reduces the need for other adaptations. It also makes people feel more welcome and included because they have not had to request something different.

Making communications as accessible as possible matters. When it is done well, it benefits a large range of people as well as people with disabilities. This is because some people face similar barriers to people with disabilities but for different reasons. For example, they may be reading in a language that is not their first language. Or they may not have much time and prefer communication that is not too complicated.

This guide is part of a wider toolkit. The toolkit also includes a glossary of terms, a summary of our research about collaboration and more tools. You can explore the tools and resources here.

Making communications accessible and inclusive with limited resources

Much of the existing guidance on accessible and inclusive communications assumes that people have access to accessibility tools.

For example, guidance might advise using screen readers or braille. But not everyone has access to these tools. Guidance often assumes that people have a high level of digital access. But this is also not always true in low- and middle-income countries, especially for marginalised groups.

This is why it is always important to consider the context you are working in. You may find there is limited internet or bandwidth or not many people have assistive technologies.

The use of many local languages in an area can also make it difficult to provide communications in people's preferred language. Some of these languages are also mainly spoken, which means not all speakers of that language will be able to read it. There can also be different sign languages within a country.

There may be other challenges such as a lack of affordable and high-quality printing, and low-quality printing can make communications materials blurred and hard to read. Full colour images may also be too costly to print.

This tool addresses some of these things by providing suggestions that work in low-resource contexts. It is also important to work with organisations of people with disabilities when preparing accessible and inclusive materials so they can advise you on any issues that are specific to that area.

All communications should be tested by people with disabilities to make sure they are accessible.

CHECKLIST FOR ACCESSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS

Design and layout for standard information

All information in any format should be easy to read or receive, and easy to understand.

Font

- Use a minimum 12- or 14-point font because larger type is easier to read. Fonts in 11 and below are difficult to read.
- Use a sans-serif font instead of a serif font – it is easier to read. Arial is a sans-serif font. Spiky or curly fonts are difficult to read, for example, Times New Roman.
- The difference between serif and sans-serif fonts is less relevant for some languages. For example, languages with symbols or different characters. When using these kind of languages, choose fonts that are clear, smooth and easy to read. Avoid fonts that are very spiky or very curly.

Style

- Avoid italics or underlined text, especially italics underlined, as both formats are harder to read.
- Only use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence, as TEXT IN BLOCK CAPITALS IS DIFFICULT TO READ.
- Use bold and font size for emphasis. However, avoid too many changes of type, print size or formats as this is confusing. People who have difficulty with reading need consistency.
- Highlight or emphasise headings to make it easier for people to scan for the information they want.

X Avoid serif fonts - they are harder to read

X Avoid *italics* and underlined and especially *underlined italics*

X AVOID WRITING TEXT IN CAPITALS

X Avoid using lots of changes of TYPE within a *body of text - IT CAN BE VERY **confusing.***

What works

Using bold and changes in font sizes for headlines can work to bring emphasise.

Remember to not make too many changes though as it can become visually overwhelming.

Get Noticed.

Use headlines to make your information easily scanable for a reader.

Colour and images

- Check that colours used together stand out clearly against each other. For example, black text on a dark brown background or orange text on a white background will not be visible. The easiest combination for reading is dark text against a light background.
- Avoid using too many colours at once as this makes it harder for your messages to be understood. In particular, avoid colour combinations which are hard for people with colour blindness to read, like red and green.
- Avoid putting text over photographs, graphics or patterns as it makes it difficult to read the text. Using a plain background for the text works better.

X Avoid using colours with low contrast, like this...

X or, this.

I AM NOT ACCESSIBLE.

I AM NOT ACCESSIBLE.

Use colours with a strong contrast

I AM ACCESSIBLE.

I AM ACCESSIBLE.

I AM ACCESSIBLE.

I AM ACCESSIBLE.

I AM ACCESSIBLE.

Layout

- Align text to the left-hand margin. Justified text (where both sides are even) creates uneven spacing which can be difficult to read.
- Avoid the use of columns where possible. If you must use columns, ensure there is plenty of spacing between each column. Use no more than two columns on a page. People who are not fluent readers (for example, because they have dyslexia, or because English is their second language) may not be able to scan text as quickly as other people, so switching from one column to another can be confusing.
- Keep layout simple so that people can follow the text. A fussy layout is confusing and can be off-putting to many people.
- Use dotted lines to enable the reader to track across open space.
- Ensure there is enough space between lines to make it easy to read.

Local language

- Local language translation often requires different spacing and length. Translations must be tested for readability and length in local languages.
- Ensure the fonts you use support local scripts.

Print-specific guidelines

- Be aware that someone might read your document using specialist equipment, such as a magnifier, video magnifier or scanning device. The layout and structure of your document will have a big impact on their device's effectiveness. If you are printing a bound leaflet or booklet, do not print too close to the centre-fold or you will make it difficult for someone to use a magnifier.
- Print onto a good quality matte-finish paper to avoid glare. Avoid using gloss paper.
- If you need to print double sided, use thicker paper to stop the text bleeding through to the other side.
- If a table goes over two pages, insert column headings on both pages.

Digital accessibility

Not everyone is digitally included. And people with disabilities are more likely to be digitally excluded than other people.

In some countries, the bandwidth needed to view videos or high-resolution images might not be available, so you should use a range of channels to communicate to people. Having said that, many people in Kenya and Ghana (and other African countries) get information through a mobile phone rather than a desktop or laptop computer, and this should be taken into account when considering digital accessibility.

Mobile phone accessibility

- Websites or other online communications should be formatted to be viewable on a mobile screen.
- The minimum font size is 12.
- Avoid asking people to access materials by downloading them. People may have limited bandwidth or older phones without storage space, so key information should be available as a weblink.

WhatsApp and other social media

- A lot of community-level communication uses WhatsApp. When communicating on WhatsApp be sure to send text versions of any voice notes, and keep messages short and clear.
- Over-use of emojis instead of words can make text difficult to read and understand. Do not use many emojis and only use them at the end of the text. When someone is using an e-reader, an emoji will disrupt the flow of the text because the e-reader will describes the emoji (e.g., 'smiling face with sunglasses').
- Over-use of hashtags and abbreviations can make some messages difficult to understand. Always capitalise the beginning of every word in a hashtag (e.g., #DisabilityInclusion) so that it is easier to read, does not accidentally spell something else, and is accessible to assistive software. This is called CamelCase.

Use of images and video

- Captions (or alt text) are very important for people who cannot see images well. The captions or alt text should describe the image. This means that anyone using an e-reader can

get an understanding of what the image shows.

- Use compressed, low data images. Very high resolution images or dynamic content can take a long time to load. They can also be costly for people who pay per data use.
- Where videos are used, these should always be subtitled. The subtitles should appear on a consistent background.
- If you use text in a video, it should also be read out in a voice over (in case someone cannot read). All text should move at an average reading speed.

Screen-reader friendly content

Use Styles: People who are using a reader to read your document will appreciate it if 'styles' are used, as this means they will be able to see whether a piece of text is a title, a header or body text. Styles are found in almost every software, including Word, Powerpoint and the Adobe InDesign Suite. Styles also allow screen readers to signpost what someone is about to read. This means people do not have to read the whole document if they are only interested in a specific section.

Avoid PDFs: Some PDFs are just a scanned image, which screen readers cannot read. Other PDFs can be read by screen readers, but they cannot differentiate between styles. This means the screen reader will read the whole document without a break. If the person using the screen reader stops reading, they will have to restart the document from the beginning if they want to continue.

Formats like Issuu, which look like the pages of a book on screen, are not accessible and should be avoided.

Use descriptive hyperlinks: For example, a hyperlink like 'read the report' or 'donate now' is clearer than 'click here'.

Alternative formats

Producing information following the guidelines above will allow you to reach most of the people most of the time. But it will not meet everyone's needs. For some people, you need to be able to communicate in alternative formats. Examples include large print, braille, audio and sign language.

To make communications accessible, you only need to know what someone's access need is. You do not usually need in-depth information about someone's impairment. In fact, knowing someone's impairment but not their access need can be unhelpful. For example, you may know that someone has a visual impairment. But if you do not know whether they can read print in font size 18 or need a braille document or an email version of any communication because their software will 'read' the document to them, then you will not know what kind of alternative format to provide.

Thinking about access at the start of the design process can help later when producing alternative formats. For example, when you are designing a leaflet or poster, before you format the text, save it to a graphics-free word, plain text file. You can use this to create a large print version or to send it via email to someone with a speech-to-text screen reader.

With all alternative formats, where possible, check with the person first what suits them best.

Large print

This is the most commonly requested format (from 16 or 18 point upwards). Large print can be provided quickly as long as you have kept the original text.

- 1.5-line spacing makes large print easier to read.
- Make sure you reformat the document. It is usually best to take out any text boxes.
- Always check any references to page numbers in the text. This is because the document will be longer once you have made the print larger, so they will not be the same as in the original.
- If somebody wants a document in a larger font size, never just enlarge your original using a photocopier. Always prepare a new document to suit their needs.

Audio

Audio information, such as a voice file, may be requested by all sorts of people who find written materials difficult to use.

Audio information may also be more accessible than print in local languages because some people may not be able to read their own language. Key messages in audio format can be used for community radio or public address systems.

Braille

Not all people with visual impairments can read braille. And some people who can read braille may prefer to have digital materials in some settings. If you get a request for information in braille, partner with an organisation of people with disabilities to produce this.

To produce braille, the document being translated should be in plain text. This means you need to remove all text boxes, lines or other formatting, and where possible remove bullet points. You may also need to slightly alter the text so it makes sense without bullet points.

Sign language

Deaf people who have sign language as their first language may prefer a video of a signed version of the information.

Sign language is also commonly used in meetings to enable Deaf people to communicate. Partner with an organisation of people with disabilities to find the correct version of sign language to use, and to find good quality sign language interpreters.

Easy Read

Easy Read is designed for people with intellectual disabilities. It involves putting all the text into easy language, using short sentences and reinforcing the meaning of the text with clear pictures.

Try to use line drawings or photographs which can be easily inserted into a document. If resources are limited, uncoloured line drawings can be easiest to reproduce, but they may not be as informative for the end user.

Partner with an organisation of people with disabilities to produce Easy Read materials to meet your needs.

Checklist for inclusive communications

Storytelling

People want to tell their own stories, and for those stories to reflect their agency and resilience.

- Use people's own words to tell their story. Use the first person ('I' and 'we', instead of 'he', 'she' or 'they') and not just key quotes.
- Include rounded details about people's lives beyond the specific project or support being covered in the story.
- Involve participants in gathering stories and images.
- Ensure people understand and are happy with how their story has been presented and used. Does the story's message honour the person?
- Think about whose story is shown first and last, and who has the final say. These things can reveal unconscious bias which you can reflect on.

Using plain language

If the message is not simple and straightforward, people will turn off very quickly. This does not mean you should talk down to people. But it does mean you should use plain and straightforward language and avoid jargon. Good communication is clear and easy to understand. Using simple language does not mean what you are saying is simple, it just means that it is easy to understand.

- Use words that your reader will understand. For example, use 'tell' rather than 'inform'. 'About' rather than 'in respect of'. 'Go' instead of 'proceed'.
- Do not assume your audience is familiar with technical or professional language.
- Provide an explanation of complex terms or words if you need to use them.
- Avoid having lots of abbreviations or acronyms. (For example, using OPWD to stand for 'organisation of people with disabilities'.) It can be hard for the reader to remember these, and it can be off-putting.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs. A good rule: one idea per sentence, and no more than two to three sentences in a paragraph.
- Be concise. Fewer words mean there is more space to use in larger print.

- Think about the terms you use for the people you work with. 'Beneficiary' is commonly used, but it is a passive word and not empowering.
- Use the terms that people with disabilities use to describe themselves. Some examples are in appendix 1.

Avoiding stereotypes

- Writers should familiarise themselves with common stereotypes, then make sure they avoid these stereotypes.
- Sometimes stereotypes are so deeply held that the people they are about will use them or use negative language about themselves. Support people to describe themselves in a more positive way.
- Avoid making generalising statements about groups of people. (For example, 'all Deaf people are denied education'.) Avoid 'othering' groups of people ('othering' means making some groups of people seem different to you or to the majority) by using terms like 'they', 'them' and 'these people'.
- Avoid describing people in ways that make them seem powerless. Words like 'child-like' and 'trusting' can be problematic.
- People with disabilities are rounded individuals and can be leaders, teachers, parents and decision makers, not just passive recipients of charity.

Visual representation

- Make sure people know they do not have to have their picture taken or story recorded.
- Make it clear how someone's image will be used. Where possible, discuss the message it will be used with, ask for their view on this message and take into account what they think.
- Avoid visual stereotypes, like showing people with disabilities as helpless victims or showing women doing gendered tasks like housework.
- Make sure a range of people with disabilities are represented in your communications. Often, the focus is on people who use wheelchairs.

Using children in communications

- Consider children's rights and what impact using images of a child might have on their future life chances.
- Do not show children alone. (If they really were alone, how did you get consent?)
- If the child's image is used, include their views in your story or communication.
- Consider how the child will feel if they were to look at the image and the story as an adult. Would they still feel this is a truthful and desirable representation of them?
- Ask yourself what is the purpose of showing the child in the story. Is the child central to the story? If they are just there to add content or 'colour' to the story, you might be objectifying them. (When someone is seen more as an object than a person.)

Symbols

- It can sometimes be useful to use symbols instead of text. However, symbols should be designed carefully to avoid sending a negative message.

Sharing the image and final communications

- As a minimum, we should show people their images at the time they are taken (if a digital camera is being used) or soon afterwards.
- If possible, the final content should also be shared with the people being featured, whether they appear in a blog, poster, video or other communication material.

"Thinking from my perspective as an inequality campaigner there's so many things that people in this space do not understand, including communication and how different people receive it, how different people understand it. It's not something that is ever considered when putting communications out. So it's definitely important."

Inequality activist, Kenya

Further Resources

A large number of guides and resources are available online, some of these are listed below:

ILGA-Europe's Framing Equality Toolkit, available here

Radi-Aid's research: A Story of Visual Communication in Six African Countries. Available here

For more information on accessible design and layout, see the UK's Royal National Institute for Blind People's Top Tips for creating accessible print. Available here

The Paciello Group provides a colour contrast analyser which you can download. Available here

The World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines provide guidance for web. Available here

Sightsavers has produced this useful guidance on making websites accessible. Available here

Sightsavers has also produced inclusivity guidance for organisations. Available here

DOCHAS' Guide to Ethical Communications - Dochas is essential and straightforward reading. Available here

For more information on plain English see the Plain English Campaign here

In 2017, Save the Children took an in-depth look at its use of images and how it treats the people in them, then used this to develop a set of recommendations. This guidance can be considered good practice when creating and using images and can be equally applied to video. Available here

Oxfam has produced an excellent inclusive language guide. This is recommended reading if you would like to learn more about this topic. Available here

Acknowledgements

This guidance was developed in October 2025 with inputs from activists taking part in the Connecting Disability Justice and Inequalities research project in Ghana and Kenya. We thank everyone for their input. We are grateful for the support from our engagement group:

Moses Fordjour, Ghana Federation of Disability Organisations

Esther Mkamori, United Disabled Persons of Kenya

Erick O. Sande, United Disabled Persons of Kenya

Prof Wisdom Kwadwo Mprah, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology

With thanks to the research team Edward Adiibokah, Lyla Adwan-Kamara, Perpetual Kariuki, Betty Mulavi, Philippa Mullins, Fredrick Ouko, Lionel Sakyi, Liz Sayce, Hamidreza Vasheghanifarahani.

Activists and organisations are welcome to adapt the guidance to meet their needs. Please note that the guidance may need to be updated as time passes and circumstances and local contexts change.

This publication was made possible thanks to funding from the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) programme, based at the International Inequalities Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Atlantic Fellows | FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EQUITY

APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE DISABILITY LANGUAGE

The language recommendations below reflect the language generally preferred by our research participants. The 'do say' column shows some recommendations for how to talk about disability. The 'don't say' column shows language that people may find offensive, insulting, or inaccurate.

You will see some variety in the recommendations. This is because the preferred language can vary among different people with disabilities and their organisations. It is always important to listen to how people with disabilities want to be spoken about.

Not every person with a disability will agree with these recommendations, but you may find them useful as a general guide.

Do say

People with disabilities (used commonly internationally)

Don't say

The disabled, the handicapped

This implies that people with disabilities are all the same, and as a group they are separate from the rest of society. It is therefore seen as negative.

The word 'handicapped' is offensive to many people with disabilities because it is derived from historical associations with 'cap in hand', which is an image for begging.

Do say

Person with disabilities

In the UK Disabled Person is a common term

Don't say

Living with a disability

This can be mocked by some people who point out that they live with family or friends, or even pets. People with disabilities don't live with their disability, they are disabled by the barriers in society.

Do say

Person with an intellectual disability

Some people also say learning difficulty or a learning disability

Don't say

Mentally handicapped, retarded, subnormal

Do say

Blind person

Person with visual impairments

Person with low vision

Don't say

The blind, the sight impaired

Do say

Deaf person

Person with hearing impairments

Hard of hearing

Don’t say

The deaf

The deaf and dumb

This is viewed as a negative and offensive label given to Deaf people. This terminology can imply that Deaf people are incapable of being taught, of learning or of reasoned thinking.

Do say

People with psychosocial disabilities

Mental health service user

Person with a mental health condition

Person experiencing mental health challenges

Don’t say

Mentally ill

Suffering from mental illness

Do say

Wheelchair user

Don’t say

Wheelchair bound

This can be considered an offensive term as it suggests that a person is trapped inside their wheelchair, when in fact a person’s wheelchair can represent freedom and greater independence. Some people even say they are referred to as ‘the wheelchair’.

Do say

Person with physical or mobility impairment

Putting the word ‘person’ before ‘impairment’ is often viewed positively. This is because it shows that people are individuals and not simply part of one big, indistinguishable group, as is often implied by negative terms like ‘the disabled’.

Don’t say

Crippled

Physically handicapped

Do say

Person with chronic illness.

This can generally be used to refer to people with energy-limiting chronic conditions and long-term health conditions.

Don’t say

Invalid

This can be an offensive word because it equates impairments with illness. The term could also be taken to mean that a person with a chronic illness is ‘not valid’, ‘incorrect’ or ‘worthless’.

Vulnerable

This is a word which is often used to describe people with disabilities. But just because someone has an impairment does not automatically mean someone is vulnerable. Anyone, disabled or non-disabled, can be vulnerable for a variety of reasons at various stages in their lives.